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AUTHOR Trachsel, Mary
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ABSTRACT

Documents produced for three separate conferences that were convened to discuss the aims and methods of English instruction in the past century demonstrate the pedagogical shift from a "formal" concept of literacy to a more functional one. An 1896 conference at Harvard University reviewed secondary school and college English instruction during the preceding two decades, and the resulting reports aptly demonstrate the belletristic definitions of literacy which prevailed in academic circles. In 1916 twenty universities from across the country, convening for a second conference, subscribed to a formal definition of literacy similar to Harvard's 20 years earlier. At an ACT conference in 1977, participants generally agreed that formal criteria still prevailed in the teaching and evaluation of literacy skills and advocated educational reform, calling for schools to adopt a set of functional criteria that took into account the social use of language as defined by the students' own needs. Further indications of the ways in which the concept of functional literacy has influenced the teaching and evaluation of language arts skills can be seen in recent developments in writing assessment programs. In fostering literacy skills, the language arts teachers must not only be aware of the students' own perceived language needs, as advocated by the functionalist school, but also be prepared to guide students' perceptions of those needs, in keeping with formalist thinking. This paper includes a substantive bibliography of books and articles dealing with literacy. (HTH)

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Mary Trachsel

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Mary Trachsel
University of Texas, Austin
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Formal and Functional Notions of Literacy in the History of American Education

The term "functional literacy" describes one approach to answering the question, "What is literacy?" We probably associate the notion of "functional literacy" with Third World or adult literacy programs more than with the teaching of reading and writing skills in schools and universities. The term first appeared in a non-academic setting, during the Second World War when the U. S. Army needed a way to sort servicemen according to their abilities to understand written instructions. In the 50's the same general concept was adopted by UNESCO to define the goals of literacy programs in developing countries. By 1962 UNESCO defined the functionally literate person as one who had acquired the knowledge and literacy skills needed for effective functioning in his group or community and who was able to use his attainments in reading, writing, and arithmetic toward his own and his community's development. Reading and/or filling out tax forms, driving instructions, job application forms, television guides and newspapers are examples of the kinds of skills that might be required of a functionally literate U. S. citizen. The required set of skills, of course, is dependent upon the individual's position in the community, whether it be required by external forces or desired by the individual him or herself.

In contrast to this functional notion, school systems in this country have traditionally maintained what we might call a "formal" concept of literacy. Formal definitions tend to equate language forms--for example, grammatical structures or literary models--with thought processes in isolation from social context. The emphasis here is on correct usage and stylistic finesse as opposed to successful performance in social contexts. Formal literacy, in other words, ascribes qualitative values to sets of linguistic structures to the extent that a grasp of a "standard" form of a language or a familiarity with a standard literary canon may

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come to symbolize intellectual superiority.

In recent years, however, school and college English instruction has gradually begun to adopt a more functional notion of literacy. The extent to which this shift has occurred becomes obvious when we examine documents produced by three separate conferences to discuss the aims and methods of English in secondary schools and colleges in the past century. Recent developments in the assessment of writing for schools and colleges provide further information about this trend in our English education system.

The first of the three conferences, sponsored by Harvard University in 1896, reviewed school and college English instruction during the preceding two decades, and the reports of its members aptly demonstrate the belletristic definitions of literacy which prevailed in academic circles at the time. One member, Sherman Hill, refers to writing ability as "literary skill" and contends that "an accurate and refined use of the mother tongue" is "the single mental acquisition that is an essential part of the education of a lady or a gentleman." In keeping with this philosophy that literacy skills directly reflect mental abilities, the Harvard admissions test at that time required students to produce essays on literary topics and to meet certain formal criteria, namely correct spelling, punctuation, grammar, and expression. The rationale behind requiring students to demonstrate mastery of selected works from the literary canon as well as the formalities of the written code was explained as an effort to improve the students' capacity for thought and expression:

> . . . the student, by becoming familiar with a few works holding a high place in English literature, would acquire a taste for good reading, and would insensibly adopt better methods of thought and better forms of expression.

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In short, as reflected in the Harvard study, literacy was a matter of taste as well as intellectual powers, and a "literate" command of the language was an important social symbol. In order to foster these qualities, Harvard issued a call for more and better instruction in reading and writing in the mother tongue in both the secondary schools and the colleges.

Twenty years later, in response to this call, twenty universities from across the country convened for a second conference and published a follow-up report on English education in American universities, each describing its own English program and the educational philosophy that guided it. For the most part, all twenty of the universities subscribed to a formal definition of literacy similar to Harvard's twenty years before. The dominant educational philosophy that emerged from the university reports was the assumption that good reading and good language use resulted in good thinking. According to the spokesman from Lafayette College, the classics were to be taught in such a way that students would "rejoice in these n noble passages and remember them forever." In this way, students would be provided with "the very words to guide their higher thought and with forms of graceful speech which will prompt them to easy utterances of courtesy and affection, and devotion."

Similarly, the conference spokesman for Yale University described a program in which composition instruction consisted of weekly exercises based on the works of famous authors. Such instruction was intended to "direct the attention of the student to qualities of style and methods of composition to arouse his appreciative interest in the works of literature and to improve the quality of his writing by improving the quality of his thought."

An appendix to the collection of reports describes an appalling level of illiteracy among university students and attributes the problem to the "democratization of literature." By this is meant the influx of the masses into the academy and the resulting perditious effects of an encounter between bourgeoise sensibili-

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ties and works of literature. Chief among these was a disrespect for "all sustained and dignified discourse and high poetic sentiment."

More than sixty-five years later, in 1977, the third conference to be discussed here was sponsored by ACT to examine the methods and goals of secondary and college-level English instruction. At this time, an expanding and changing student population with non-traditional academic needs and goals was still at issue. By 1977, however, the country's leading college and university language arts specialists were more inclined to adapt curriculum and instruction to meet the changing needs of students than were educators of previous years, most of whom required that students be the ones to adapt themselves to an established program of instruction.

Conference participants generally agreed that formal criteria still prevailed in the teaching and evaluation of literacy skills in most secondary and post-secondary schools. Literature, they reported, was receiving primary emphasis at both levels of instruction. Usage and mechanics tended to be stressed more in high school programs, whereas critical reading and writing focussed on literary texts were stressed more heavily in colleges. To replace these methods of instruction, conference members advocated an educational reform that called for schools to adopt a set of functional criteria that took into account the social use of language as defined by the students' own needs. Ideally, the conference participants agreed, the primary concern of language arts probrams at all levels should be language itself--particularly as it is used in social contexts--and more attention should be paid to the role of appropriateness and social judgment in language use.

Most of the participants cited in the 1973 NCTE ruling on the students' right to their own language when they argued that grammar was too often confused with usage. This confusion, they believed, was a misunderstanding on the part of educators that led to social injustices in the assessment of writing skills. Various participants

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suggested that instead of monitoring and correcting students' usage, teachers and test makers should be trying to encourage students to understand written language as a medium of meaningful human interaction.

Further indications of the ways in which the concept of functional literacy has influenced the teaching and evaluation of language arts skills in the schools can be seen in recent developments in writing assessment programs. In the U. S. and Canada three large-scale attempts to use functional--or communicative--criteria in writing assessment in the past decade are the Bay Area Writing Project (1974), the British Columbia Assessment of Written Expression (1980), and the Portfolio Plan currently proposed by testmakers at ETS. One feature common to all three of th those projects is their attempt to identify and measure the specific skills students are likely to use not only in school activities but also in their lives outside of school--at home, at work, and so forth. Another significant feature of the three programs is their use of non-academic personnel to help design the tests and to evaluate students' performances. In both the Bay Area and British Columbia projects, for instance, parents and professionals, businesspeople and other members of the community where the evaluation takes place were asked to identify the types of writing tasks they believed stduents were likely to encounter in the community as well as the specific literacy skills they felt students needed in order to accomplish those tasks. An example of a writing task posed by a construction work environment, for instance, might be writing to request that building supplies, equipment, and workers be sent from one position of a large site to another at a particular time. An important specific skill for carrying out this task might be the ability to condense information in a brief but clear message format. In both assessment projects, functional writing tasks and skills of this sort were posed along with more traditional academic tasks such as summarizing in a single paragraph the contents of an expository essay.

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The Portfolio Project proposed by ETS makes a similar attempt to uphold rhetorically functional notions of literacy by asking students to write for various specified audiences and purposes which may or may not be academic in nature. As one of its suggested tasks, the Portfolio Project asks students to write a cover letter for their portfolios. These may take the form of a letter of application, either to college admissions officials or to prospective employers. In order to provide students with the opportunity to use their literacy skills in a genuinely functional manner, the letter actually accompanies the portfolio of works selected by the students to represent their writing skills. If the student should seek further education or employment where writing skills are important, the letter will be read by those who decide on admission or hiring. This cover letter, then, is evaluated not with the typical letter grade, numerical score, or norm-referenced percentage ranking, but rather with the success or failure of the writing itself to perform its intended function.

There are, of course, other indications of a shift from formal to functional notions of literacy within the academy. The appearance of Writing Across the Curriculum programs in college English departments, for instance, seems to be an acknowledgement that students need to learn an expanded range of language forms and conventions in order to function successfully in a wide variety of professions and activities. Special courses in business and technical writing, basic writing and ESL are based on similar assumptions and take into account the different backgrounds and skills levels of the individual students as well as their needs for the future.

Despite the appearance of functionally based forms of writing instruction and assessment, testing programs such as those mentioned here, and it might be presumed the language arts curricula and instruction which their formats implicitly demand, are relatively rare at present. In fact, the leaning toward inclusion of functional or communicative criteria to measure and define linguistic performance and compe-

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tence is presently more conspicuous and more consciously employed in what might be referred to as "non-traditional" varieties of language instruction: in Third World literacy programs and adult literacy projects, for instance, in reading and writing instruction for young children and non-traditional students in more advanced education, and in foreign language education. Because a theory of functional language use and pedagogy is more readily and more clearly articulated in these fields than in current composition research at the secondary and college levels, it is time for those of us who are interested in expanding academic notions of literacy to familiarize ourselves with the research in functional language use provided by these related subject areas.

This is not to imply, however, that the functional approach to literacy instruction provides a panacea which will solve the "literacy crisis" in our schools for once and for all. As Keith will discuss in the next paper, the "standard" forms which are the object of formal literacy instruction can provide students with access to intellectual, social, cultural, and economic realms which many of them wish to enter. Educators, for the most part, are well aware of this fact, even though students themselves may not be. In fostering literacy skills, then, the language arts teacher must not only be aware of the students' own perceived language needs, as advocated by the functionalist school, but must also be prepared to guide students' perceptions of those needs, in keeping with formalist thinking. Striking the proper balance between the two of course depends on a number of considerations--the individual students, their backgrounds and their goals, the type of social contexts in which they must or want to function, and the educational philosophy of the school itself. As individuals who have at least a partial responsibility for determining this balance, teachers of reading and writing at any level must become familiar with the methods and rationales behind both formalist and functionalist theories of literacy instruction.

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Daniell
Walters

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